MIND IN THE MODERN WORLD

Lionel Trilling

The 1972 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities

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For most of the past few centuries, it has been a central tenet of Western civilization that the human race might find salvation, which is to say happiness, in the right exercise of its mental powers. But today it is not difficult to discern a complex tendency to impugn and devalue the very concept of mind. In an eloquent and brilliant analysis—which forms the text of the address Lionel Trilling delivered as the first annual Thomas Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities in 1972—Professor Trilling explores the meaning of "mind" in our modern world and the reasons for its apparent eclipse.

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The 1972 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities

LIONEL TRILLING

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MIND IN THE MODERN WORLD

In 1946, in the last year of his life, H. G. Wells published a little book which is surely one of the saddest and possibly one of the most portentous documents of our century. Much of its sadness lies in how far it is from being a good book. Wells was old and ill and sunk in despair over the Second World War; he still wrote with his characteristic assertiveness, but he no longer commanded the lucidity which had marked his prose for fifty years, and this last utterance is neither orderly in its argument nor perspicuous in its expression. Yet it does communicate its informing idea, which is as heartbreaking as the incoherence in which it is set forth. Actually, the whole import of the essay is contained in its title, *Mind at the End of Its Tether*. With that weary and desperate phrase Wells repudiated his once passionately held belief that the human race might find salvation, which is to say happiness, in the right exercise of its mental powers.

The creed had been simple and unequivocal. If mind were cleared of its inherited illusions and prejudices, if it put itself to two tasks, that of perceiving the physical universe as it really is and that of comprehending its own nature, then what had long been accepted

as the inevitable rule of harsh necessity might be overthrown and mankind would achieve the felicity which was both its immemorial dream and its clear evolutionary destiny. This expectation, once the root and ground of his thought, was now said by Wells to be false. He had come to see that the power of mind which mankind required not only for the winning of felicity but even for survival was not to be counted on. Mind was at the end of its tether.

It need scarcely be said that Wells's little book made no place for itself in the intellectual life of the quarter-century after it appeared. Nor would it have done so if its mode of discourse had more nearly approached a persuasive coherence. The war, which had led Wells to abandon all hope for mind and the human race, did not have a similar effect generally. In the face of the dreadful suffering the war had entailed, in the face, too, of the close approximation to success that had been made by the brutish antirational doctrine of Nazism, as well as of the unimaginable destructive power of the new weapons that mind had brought into being, the prevailing mood was one of chastened optimism, which involved the expectation that mind would play a beneficent part in human existence.

Yet now, in this year of 1972, as I say the title of Wells's book, *Mind at the End of Its Tether*, there will, I think, be some among us, and perhaps many, who will hear it with the sense that it has a chill appositeness to our present time. Of those who entertain an apprehension about the future of mind, there may be

those who do so on Wells's absolute ground, that the tasks which are now imposed upon mind are beyond its inherent capabilities. Some will locate the cause of their anxiety in the paradoxes about the nature of mind which seem to be proposed by mind itself through the realization of its powers. Others are made uneasy by what they discern of a complex tendency of our contemporary culture to impugn and devalue the very concept of mind. Whichever way the foreboding points, I venture to believe that there will be no difficulty in understanding how it might happen that, as I first contemplated speaking under the bright aegis of the name and spirit of Thomas Jefferson, there should have arisen out of the depths of memory the dark portent of Wells's phrase.

Between Thomas Jefferson and H. G. Wells there was no affinity of personal temperament or of class tradition, and certainly none of political view. And although both men put the pursuit of happiness at the center of their speculations about man's existence, the meanings each of them attached to that enterprise were widely disparate. But they were at one in the firm confidence they placed in mind, Jefferson until his dying day, Wells up to his last years. Historically speaking they stood in the same line.

In some respects this is a very long line indeed. It goes back to the philosophers of ancient Greece both in what might be called its aesthetic appreciation of mind, its admiration of the mental faculties almost for their own sake, apart from what practical ends they

might achieve, and also in its assumption that mind can play a decisive part in the moral life of the individual person. In other respects its extent is relatively short, going back only to the Renaissance in its belief that what mind might encompass of knowledge of the physical universe has a direct bearing upon the quality of human existence, and also in its certitude that mind can, and should, be decisive in political life. In the eighteenth century, this belief established itself so firmly and extensively as to become the chief characteristic of the intellectual culture of the age.

When we consider the enthusiasm with which Jefferson assented to this master belief of his time and the assiduity with which he implemented it in the conduct of his own life, it is possible to make too much of his own mental endowment and by doing so to obscure one of the most important significances he has for us. Thus, if we apply to him the word *genius*, we ought to use it, as he did, in the quiet, unassertive sense that prevailed in the eighteenth century, to mean distinguished ability, rather than in the sense it later came to have, that of a unique power, an originating power, which puts the person who possesses it into a class apart. A unique originating power of mind Jefferson did not in fact have. He was, for example, a devoted student of philosophy, and it is possible for scholars to write learned books on the philosophy of Thomas Jefferson, yet none of them asserts that Jefferson was, in the modern sense of the word, a genius of speculative thought. He did not give new answers to old questions

or propose questions never asked before. He possessed himself of the ideas of the philosophical originators of his own time and of the past; he chose among these ideas and made use of them.

I make this point, it will be plain, not to depreciate Jefferson's native gifts of intellect but to describe their nature as he himself understood it. We may say that it was on the basis of this understanding that he conceived the place of mind in the future of the United States. He held the view, which was characteristic of the eighteenth century, that men were essentially equal in their mental faculties. This is not to say that all men have the same speed, or agility, or strength of mind, only that all men have reason and that the intellectual resources of a nation are invested not in a few but held in common.

Jefferson's estimate of the intellectual capability of the whole people is part of the fabric of American history. A great scholar of our past has traced in detail the long unhappy course of anti-intellectualism in American life, but Richard Hofstadter also made it plain to us, through his studies of higher education in the United States, how strong in our culture is the opposite tendency, to conceive of intellect as a cherished element of democracy. Of this tendency Jefferson is the presiding spirit. A sense of what he expected of the American people in the way of intellect may be readily gained from one detail of the plan of popular education which he set forth in 1783 in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. He is speaking of the instruction that is to be

given in the earliest of the three stages of schooling he proposed, not the primary skills of reading, writing, and figuring, which he takes for granted, but the substantive matter by which the minds of children are to be formed. This is to be, he says, "chiefly historical"—the memories of the pupils are "to be stored with the most useful facts of Greek, Roman, European, and American history." Consider what he understands to follow in the way of intellectual process: "History by apprising them of the past will enable them to judge the future; it will avail them of the experiences of other times and nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men. . . ."

I shall not pursue in further detail Jefferson's views on education as they illustrate his confidence in the mind of the people but shall allow this one project to speak for the whole. It can tell us much about the fortunes of mind in the course of two centuries. Jefferson hoped that most of the children who were to receive the instruction he envisaged would become farmers or be engaged in occupations connected with agriculture, and it seemed to him natural and right that men in this walk of life should have had their memories stored with "the useful facts of the past" against the day when, as citizens responsible for their own happiness, they would bring them to bear upon the events of their own time and place. The facts of the past were useful because they gave rise to ideas, and in ideas Jefferson perceived a power which would countervail the power

of property and thus make for social equality in the Republic.

Scarcely anybody nowadays will judge Jefferson's plan to be beyond debate. Our contemporary pedagogic theory will be distressed by the idea of storing what it would call the mere memories of children with what it would call mere facts and, at that, facts about the conduct of the alien race of adults in far distant times and places, having nothing to do with the desires and instincts of children. And searching questions are sure to be raised about the present state of the subject which Jefferson makes pre-eminent in elementary education. It will be asked, for instance, whether his view of history was not, as compared with ours, a naïve one. He did, of course, understand that history might be biased, that party-interest might obscure or distort the facts. But he did not doubt that the facts were to be known and that the narrative of them, which they themselves would dictate to any honest mind, would be the truth and, as such, unitary and canonical. This belief the historiography of our day teaches us to regard with skepticism.

It can be said of Jefferson that his sense of the past was definitive of his intellectual life. From earliest youth into his old age the intense imagination of the past gave impetus to his mind—as, of course, it gave impetus to all the shaping minds of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Goethe, Hegel, Darwin, Marx, Freud—all were rooted in

their sense of the past, from which derived the force with which they addressed themselves to the present. None of them could have imagined that event of our day which one eminent historian, Professor J. H. Plumb, has called the "death of the past," that mutation of culture, represented by Professor Plumb as following inevitably from the full development of industrial society, which makes the idea of the past supererogatory and, for many, nothing but limiting and obstructive.* This profound alteration of our culture is explicit in the ever-diminishing place that history is given in the curriculums of our schools and colleges. The efflorescence of mind in the two centuries before our own seems so closely bound up with the vivid imagination of the past that we are led to conclude that the urgent recollection of what man has already done and undergone in pursuit of his destiny is a necessary condition of comprehending and intending mind. And if now we may be aware of a diminished confidence in mind, of a disposition to withdraw our credence from it, we might conjecture that this is, if not a consequence, then at least a concomitance of our diminished awareness of the past, of our disaffection from history.

* * *

WHAT MIND IS, AND WHAT IT SHOULD BE, AND WHAT part it ought to play in human existence became an issue of public policy at least as early as the eighteenth century. If we regard the history of Europe between

* *The Death of the Past*, 1969.

the Puritan revolution of the seventeenth century in England and the yet more drastic revolution in France at the end of the eighteenth century, we cannot fail to be aware of a new element in the life of mankind—the ever-growing power of ideas. Professor Michael Walzer has said of the Puritan clergymen of England in the seventeenth century that they were "the first instance of 'advanced' intellectuals in a traditional society," that is to say, the first of a class of men who bring ideas, publicly expressed, to bear upon the nature of the polity, making it a question for debate how society should be constructed.* With the French Revolution this new element in human life reached a further development. Hegel said of the French Revolution that it was the first time in history that mankind recognized the principle that "thought ought to govern spiritual reality."

An early consequence of this new expectation of mind was that it gave rise to a certain coarseness of intellectual procedure—to what we call, with some adverse force, rationalism. To be rational, to be reasonable, is a good thing, but when we say of a thinker that he is committed to rationalism, we mean to convey a pejorative judgment. It expresses our sense that he conceives of the universe and man in a simplistic way, and often it suggests that his thought proceeds on the assumption that there is a close analogy to be drawn between man and a machine. This analogy, if for some it guaranteed optimism about the possibility of

* *The Revolution of the Saints*, 1965.

the control and direction of life, was for others the cause of an intense anxiety, as seeming to limit the freedom and dignity of man. To the principle of the machine the antagonists of rationalism opposed the principle of the organism, the view that man and his institutions are not designed and contrived but have their autonomous existence through the inherent laws of their growth and development.

The powerful cultural tendency to which we give the name Romanticism is defined by its effort to correct the theory of the mind which had become dominant in the eighteenth century. Opposing itself to what Pascal had called the "spirit of geometry," that is to say, the programmatic isolation of the cognitive process from feeling, imagination, and will, Romanticism insisted that these faculties were integral to any right conception of mind. Wordsworth's great autobiographical poem *The Prelude* gives the classic account of the damage done to the mind of the individual, to its powers of cognition no less than to its vital force, by the scientistic conception of mind that prevailed among intellectuals at the time of the French Revolution. The explanatory subtitle of the poem is "The Growth of the Poet's Mind"—for Wordsworth, the poet's mind was the normative mind of man. It grew, he said, not through the strengthening of its powers of analysis and abstraction but through the development of feeling, imagination, and will.

Wordsworth's attitude toward science has a peculiar pertinence to any canvass of the situation of mind in

our own culture. One of the best remembered things about Wordsworth is the antagonism to science he expressed, but it is scarcely less characteristic of his thought that he did not consent to see the poetic mind and the scientific mind as being in final opposition to each other. On the contrary, he asserted that there was a natural affinity between them. "Poetry," he said, ". . . is the impassioned expression which is on the countenance of all science," and he predicted that the day would come when the discoveries of scientists would be "as proper objects of the Poet's art as any which can be employed." There was, however, one condition which he said must prevail before this happy state of affairs could come about—that the substance of science should become familiar to those who are not scientists. No one will suppose that this familiarity has been achieved. Physical science in our day lies beyond the intellectual grasp of most men. The newspapers inform us in a loose, general way of its great dramatic events. We have our opinions of its practical consequences, but its operative conceptions are alien to the mass of educated persons. They generate no cosmic speculations, they do not engage emotion or challenge imagination. Our poets are indifferent to them.

The old humanistic faith conceived science, together with mathematics, to be almost as readily accessible to understanding and interest as literature and history. Jefferson took this for granted. The belief that the fully developed man—the "whole man," as the phrase goes, or went—must have, and would want to

have, *some* knowledge of science and mathematics was until recently taken for granted in the American theory of higher education and was implemented in the requirements of the curriculum. These requirements, it is well known, are undergoing severe attrition and in many colleges have been abolished. No successful method of instruction has been found, and the need for finding one no longer seems pressing, which can give a comprehension of science in its present state of development to those students who are not professionally committed to its mastery and especially endowed to achieve it.

This exclusion of most of us from the mode of thought which is habitually said to be the characteristic achievement of the modern age is bound to be experienced as a wound given to our intellectual self-esteem. About this humiliation we all agree to be silent, but can we doubt that it has its consequences, that it introduces into the life of mind a significant element of dubiety and alienation which must be taken into account in any estimate that is made of the present fortunes of mind?

But surely, it might be said, when it comes to the actual living of life this exclusion from science is not of decisive consequence. When Adam in *Paradise Lost* says that he wants to understand the mysteries of the cosmos, the archangel Raphael tells him not to puzzle his head over these abstruse matters and assures him that the "prime Wisdom" is to know "that which before us lies in daily life." The good sense of the angelic

advice is confirmed when we consider that our scientific friends and colleagues do not seem any further advanced in the prime Wisdom than any of the rest of us. They see no more clearly than we do what lies before us in daily life.

But this reassurance loses some of its efficacy when we observe that, as compared with the relation in which we stand to physical science, most of us do not come any closer to the contemporary intellectual disciplines which address themselves to the affairs of daily life. Economics may serve as an example. In 1848, John Stuart Mill published his *Principles of Political Economy*. The book was at once a great popular success; over the next fifty years thirty-two editions of it appeared in England alone. The most widely read author of the day, whom Mill referred to as "that creature Dickens," wrote a novel, *Hard Times*, which undertook to demonstrate how deplorable were the human implications of Mill's views. John Ruskin, until then known only as a critic of art, attacked the assumptions of the work in a great series of essays which Thackeray published in his *Cornhill Magazine* until the outraged subscribers threatened to cancel. That is to say, Mill's treatise on economics entered into the general culture of its time; it was an object of the general intellect of the nation. We know that in our day no work of economic theory comparable to Mill's in completeness and authority could be similarly received, that any contemporary economist must think and write in terms which by their abstractness and technicality put his

subject at a hopeless distance from the layman. In one or another degree this is true of the practitioners of the other social sciences.

In the humanistic disciplines the situation is similar. I have already spoken of the deteriorating status of history. Philosophy would appear to have become a technical subject for specialists and no longer consents to accommodate the interest and effort of any reasonably strong general intelligence. With my own discipline of literary study the case is somewhat more complicated. Over recent decades much of the study of literature has proceeded on the assumption—how it would have astonished Jefferson!—that literary works are not so readily accessible to the understanding as at first they might look to be, and there have developed elaborate and sophisticated methods for their comprehension which cannot but have tended to make literature seem an esoteric subject available only to expert knowledge. As long as twenty years ago some literary critics of high repute complained that the hyperactivity of criticism and scholarship had come to stand as a barrier between the ordinary reader and the literary work. This objection did not question the usefulness of literary study itself. On the contrary, it affirmed the faith in the inherent instructive power of literature which had long characterized American higher education. At the present time, however, that faith is being brought into ultimate question. Within the literature-teaching profession itself there is now a significant body of opinion which holds that litera-

ture, so far from having an educative power, can only obscure truth and impede virtue.

This view has been put forward by a person no less eminent in the profession than a recent president of the Modern Language Association, Professor Louis Kampf, who in his presidential address of 1971 assured his colleagues that the teaching of literature in American colleges is now virtually at its end, having lost all rational justification. Professor Kampf made reference to what he correctly takes to have been Matthew Arnold's shaping influence upon the literature-teaching profession in America. But he did not locate that influence in the part of Arnold's theory of literature where it truly resides, in the continuing force of the famous characterization of literature as "a criticism of life" and in Arnold's definition of criticism as the effort "to see the object as in itself it really is," the objects upon which it directs itself being not literature alone but also ideas in general and most especially ideas about society. Professor Kampf characterizes literature in a way that is at an opposite pole from Arnold's—literature, he says, is nothing but "a diversion and a spectacle," it exists wholly in what he calls the "realm of aesthetics" and thus stands at an ultimate remove from "practical activity." That is to say, it has no possible bearing upon the matters which must be the chief or only objects of concern, the anomalies and injustices of American life. Why, if the dereliction of literature from seriousness is this absolute, the totalitarian countries are so fearful of it Professor Kampf

does not tell us. He is prepared, however, to name the exact moment when, after generations during which teachers were animated by their faith in the educative powers of literature, they came at last to understand that theirs was a commitment to a corrupting frivolity—the year was 1968, the occasion was the campus uprisings which, in Professor Kampf's view, at long last forced social and political reality upon the consciousness of students and teachers alike. Since 1968, Professor Kampf says, "the young go into the profession with dread; the old can scarcely wait for retirement; and those of the middle years yearn for sabbaticals." He speaks as the elected chief officer of the professional association of teachers of literature: in his estimate of the morale of his constituency there must be some quantum of truth. We can therefore say that in our time the mind of a significant part of a once proud profession has come to the end of its tether.

* * *

I HAVE TOUCHED UPON CERTAIN DEVELOPMENTS in the organized intellectual life of our day which may be thought to make an individual person's participation in it difficult or fruitless. But if it is indeed the case that an uneasiness has come into our relation to mind, we ought to consider whether this might not be something other than a response to particular alienating circumstances, whether it is not rather the expression of an attitude toward mind which is more nearly autono-

mous, an adverse judgment passed upon mind in its very essence.

It is a commonplace of our day to speak of crises of authority, and the glibness with which we use the phrase does not derogate from the salient actuality of what it denotes. One such crisis of authority, we might suppose, is taking place in relation to mind. Certainly a chief characteristic of mind is the claims which it makes, or which are made for it, to a very high authority indeed. Of these claims one goes so far as to identify mind with divinity itself, and it was once usual to express the idea of intellectual authority in terms which were explicitly analogous with social authority and the status pertaining to it. The classic example is Plato's account of mind, which asserts the superiority of thought to all other activities and represents it as free and noble while condemning physical occupations, however necessary and skilled, as mechanical and servile; in Plato's ideal polity all authority is vested in men of mind, the Philosopher-Kings. Aristotle can imagine the right development of individual mind as taking place only in men of high rank. The association of mind with social authority continues into modern times, when, however, the emphasis is placed upon the aggressive activity by which authority is achieved and asserted—in the nineteenth century the received way of praising mind was to connect it with the aristocratic-military ideal: we hear of "the march of mind," of "man's unconquerable mind," of "the imperial intellect," of "heroes of thought."

But at the end of the nineteenth century a voice was raised to say that mind in its traditional authoritative and aggressive character was so far from being in the service of mankind as actually to constitute a principle of social evil. The voice was that of William Morris in *News from Nowhere*, the enchanting romance in which he envisioned a society of perfect felicity. Two ideals were to be realized in Morris's utopia: one was equality; the other was rest, the cessation of all anxious effort. To this end Morris excluded science, philosophy, and high art from his community. His happy people occupy themselves with what he had elsewhere called the "lesser arts," those modest enterprises of the hand which produce useful and decorative objects of daily life. Morris wanted neither the aggressivity of comprehension and control which highly developed mind directs upon the world nor the competitiveness and self-aggrandizement which obtain among those individual persons who commit themselves to the life of thought and creation and which he associates with the worst traits of capitalist enterprise. He wanted no geniuses to distress their less notable fellows by their pre-eminent ability to tell the truth or be interesting, and to shine brighter than the general run of mankind, requiring our submission to the authority of their brilliance, disturbing us with novel ideas and difficult tastes, perhaps tempting some few to emulate them by giving up rest in order to live laborious days and incur the pains of mental fight. As Morris's young friend William Butler Yeats was to put it, mind says, "Thou

fool," and Morris wanted no such divisive, anti-egalitarian manners in his society. He would not even allow teachers into it, justifying their exclusion by his certitude that anybody could learn all by himself all that he wanted and needed to know.

News from Nowhere has always been regarded with a sort of affectionate condescension—most readers have been charmed by its vision of unvexed life but have felt that its attitude toward mind made it impossible for them to take it seriously. We in our time will be less disposed to condescend to the book which eight decades ago stated the case against mind that is now being openly litigated in our culture. This adversary proceeding represents mind as having two maleficent effects. One is that the authority accorded to mind leads to the negation of social equality. The other is that mind works a personal deformation in those who commit themselves to its service.

That mind could be thought to make a principle of inequality would once have bewildered any man of good will and advanced views. Jefferson thought that it was virtually of the essence of mind that it pointed toward equality, and his system of education had the specific goal of countervailing the power of property by the power of ideas, which he assumed to be accessible to all men equally. Yet we must see that whatever inherent antagonism there may be between ideas and property, they are not in all respects dissimilar. Between ideas and one form of property, money, there is actually a close analogy to be drawn. At a certain point

in history money began to play a part in society which can be thought of as ideational—in England in the late Renaissance, in a society in which the aristocratic land-owning class was prepotent, money had a disintegrating effect upon the nation's class structure and hence upon its moral and intellectual assumptions. As Shakespeare said in the famous speech in *Timon of Athens*, which Karl Marx found so apt to his own purpose, money has the power to bring into question every certitude and every piety. It was the ever-growing power of money that proposed and propagated equality as a social ideal. And then, to carry the analogy further, it can be said of ideas that they are, like money, a mobile and mobilizing form of property. They are, to be sure, accessible to all and held in common, but as they come to have power in the world, it is plain that a peculiar power or, at the least, status accrues to the individuals who first conceive them, or organize them, or make them public. Men of ideas, perhaps even more rapidly than men of money, move toward equality with men of birth. Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot appear on the eighteenth-century scene as sovereign princes of intellect.

This, of course, was not what Jefferson meant when he spoke of ideas as making for equality, nor was it what the French Revolution meant when it emblazoned the word on its banners. But with the exception of equality before the law, it was all that established society was ready for. Napoleon's maxim, "Careers open to talents," seemed in its time a quite sufficient, even

a bold, definition of social equality. In 1856, Alexis de Tocqueville, the great historian of the modern ideal of equality and of its developing force in the world, judged England to be notably advanced over France in egalitarianism because in England it was not required that a man be of gentle lineage in order for him to be received into good society and full participation in the political and cultural life of the nation. In England there had long been growing up a strong mercantile, middle-class culture which celebrated the kind of man it called "self-made," who rose from humble or simple origins to wealth, status, and influence through his talents and efforts alone, beholden to no one. The careers of men of mind might follow the same course; the necessitous childhoods of such imposing figures as Michael Faraday, Thomas Carlyle, and Charles Dickens were part of their legend of glory. And as the professions proliferated and their practitioners grew in number, more and more careers were opened not only to transcendent talent but even to ordinary competence.

No one said that this was equality, only that it was equality of opportunity. In England it had created the class of gentlemen which Tocqueville admired because it seemed so effectual a means of preventing the revolutions which plagued France, but there was no disposition of English society to go further. Carlyle and Ruskin in their impassioned demands for social justice were quite explicit in excluding equality from its conception. In 1876, when Arnold gave his famous

lecture on equality before the Royal Institute, he observed that everyone in England repelled the idea of equality, and he went so far as to say that the English had "a religion of inequality," which accounted for what he judged to be the poor tone and style of the national life. Expectably enough, Arnold saw the cause of equality as being best served by the improvement and spread of the education available to the lower-middle and working classes, and in England in relatively recent times this has become an avowed national purpose, although its realization proceeds slowly by American standards. In America for more than a century higher education, to speak only of that, has spread among the population at an ever-accelerating rate, and nothing has so much confirmed the nation's happy certitude of its commitment to equality.

We know, of course, that this sanguine view of the equalizing potential of higher education no longer prevails in its old force. Indeed, in some quarters, it has given place to a view which holds that higher education is one of the citadels of social privilege. This change in opinion has led to a radically revised conception of the nature and function of our colleges and universities.

Up to a few years ago, when our colleges and universities were still generally thought to be a successful means of upward social mobility, this one of their imputed functions was allowed to remain at least partially tacit and they could still be viewed in the light of the ideal intellectual and cultural purpose

which they traditionally avowed. Everyone was perfectly aware of their being a way to social advancement, but much of the complex interest they had for the American people, much of the esteem and even affection in which they were held, derived from the purposes of general enlightenment and humanization which they claimed, from their conceiving themselves to be in the service of disinterested mind. Now, however, with the rapidly developing opinion that our colleges and universities do not further equality to the extent that was once supposed, their equalizing function is being made fully explicit and the tendency grows ever stronger to say that they must be wholly defined by the function in which they are now said to fail. It is coming to be taken for granted that they are primarily agencies of social accreditation. They may still claim, though they do so ever less often and less firmly, that they are in the service of those ideals which are announced by the Latin mottoes on their corporate seals, ideals of "light" and "truth," but it is increasingly believed that their real duty is to enable as many people as possible to pass from a lower to a higher position in society. By an inevitable inference, the intellectual disciplines in which they give instruction are to be regarded not as of intrinsic value, but, at best, as elements of a rite of social passage and, at worst, as devices of social exclusion.

I think I do not exaggerate a view of our academic institutions which in recent years has become widely established. It scarcely need be said that such a view

can lead to no practicable program of change, that serious thought about the nature and function of education in our society cannot proceed from its cynicism and intellectual nihilism. Yet we cannot fail to take gravely the extremity of its negation, understanding it to be the index of how bitterly felt is the *de facto* situation of inequality which does indeed exist in our system of higher education. If higher education is, among other things, an institutionalized means of upward social movement, it must be recognized that many members of our society are debarred from its process by reason of an ever more galling circumstance of their disadvantaged position, a limited acculturation and an early schooling of extreme inadequacy.

The redress of this state of affairs is imperative. To all appearances, our society's commitment to the correction of the inequality is genuine, even if, like all large commitments of any democratic society, it is not perfectly single-minded. And I think there can be no doubt that our colleges and universities themselves are especially active in moving toward it. Yet if we consider some of the assumptions on which the effort of redress has so far been made by our society through its government, we must see that they constitute telling evidence of that uneasy or ambivalent or actually disaffected relation to mind which has come to mark our culture. And no less significant in this respect is the silence of our colleges and universities about what is implied for their continuing life by the particular means our society has chosen to remedy the injustice.

I have in view the posture toward colleges and universities which of recent years has been taken by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. This, of course, does not bear directly upon the inaccessibility of higher education to the members of disadvantaged ethnic groups but upon the social situation that follows from it, the low representation of these ethnic groups in the academic profession. To this the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare has responded with its directive that institutions of higher education which receive government funds shall move at once toward bringing about a statistically adequate representation on their faculties of ethnic minority groups.* The directive does not pretend that this purpose is to be accomplished without a change in the standards of excellence of the academic profession. Since it is of the essence of the situation which is being redressed that certain ethnic groups, by reason of circumstances beyond their control, have not yet produced any large number of persons trained for the

*The affirmative action program, as it is called, applies not only to certain ethnic groups but also to women. In the text of my lecture as it was delivered, the latter stipulation was included in my paraphrase of the program's directive. I omit it here because what I go on to say about the effect of the program on academic standards does not bear immediately upon it. At the present time the number of trained academic women is perhaps large enough to support the frequently expressed belief that no lowering of academic standards can result from the requirement that women be proportionately represented on faculties. Doubtless it will eventually be possible to say the same thing of the disadvantaged groups, the sooner the better. When that time comes, the anomaly of prescribed social or sexual representation in the life of the mind will perhaps seem necessary to no one.

academic profession, the prescribed representations—the word "quota" is strenuously resisted by HEW—are to be achieved by the appointment of persons who are not competitively qualified but only equal in professional attainments to the least qualified person who in a given past period has been appointed to the academic unit in question.

To the general and ideal goal of this directive every person of good will is bound to give happy assent. And it is perhaps possible to find in its particular stipulations an arguable merit. It might be argued, for example, that if certain ethnic minorities are to enter the full stream of the nation's cultural life, a good way of bringing this about is simply to put them there. It might also be contended that for members of ethnic minorities who are students in colleges and universities, the process of their education will go better if members of their own groups, even if they have been appointed without particular regard to their academic qualifications, have some decisive part in it, offering by their mere presence a needed reassurance and hope. As against such cogency as these positions may be thought to have, it must nevertheless be urged that there will be serious adverse consequences for the academic profession if it is required to surrender an essential element of its traditional best sense of itself, its belief that no considerations extraneous to those of professional excellence should bear upon the selection of its personnel.* These

*I would not wish to be understood as saying that the academic profession has invariably acted on this belief or that, even when it

consequences, we must know, will be felt not within the academic community alone but within the cultural life of our society as a whole, not least, we may be sure, by that part of it to which the disadvantaged ethnic groups will themselves look for sustenance.

This issue I do not now mean to debate; my point is only that the academic profession does not debate it. The profession must have noted that, by way of justifying the drastic sanctions which are being invoked against it, its traditional standards of training and achievement have been explicitly and as it were officially impugned, actually charged with having no other purpose than that of discriminatory exclusion. Surely it says much about the status of mind in our society that the profession which is consecrated to its protection and furtherance should stánd silent under the assault, as if suddenly deprived of all right to use the powers of mind in its own defense.

The diminished morale which marks the academic profession in its official existence is, we may suppose, of a piece with the growing intellectual recessiveness of college and university faculties, their reluctance to formulate any coherent theory for higher education, to discover what its best purposes are, and to try to realize them through the requirements of the curriculum. And

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has, its selection of its personnel has been unimpeachable. I mean to say only that, whatever the profession's inadequacies may be, the requirement that it act as if professional excellence is not of first importance is certain to have a drastically deteriorating effect upon its ethos, which, taking one thing with another, has hitherto been a reasonably good one.

no observation of the decline in academic confidence can leave out of account the effect of a tendency which of recent years has established itself within the academic community, among teachers as well as students, the ideological trend which rejects and seeks to discredit the very concept of mind. This adversary position is now highly developed and its influence is of considerable extent. However specious we may judge the position to be, we must see that it is not merely captious—those who hold it are persuaded that the concept of mind which is traditional to Western civilization is an informing principle of modern culture in those of its aspects which are most dehumanizing and life-denying.

One ground for this opinion I have already touched on: the analogy that may be drawn between the authority claimed by mind, or for it, and an exigent and even repressive social authority. Implicit in the concept of mind is the idea of order, even of hierarchy, the subordination of some elements of thought to others. And in the carrying out of the enterprises of mind a hierarchy of persons prevails—those who are recruited to such undertakings must rise from the ranks, usually by slow stages, although some are inequitably privileged to rise faster and higher than others. In the institutionalized training of mind, some persons are given, or arrogate, the right to prescribe to others a certain degree of proficiency, to specify the means by which they are to attain it, and to test the extent to which they have done so. Such personal

gratification as mind affords is likely to be of the postponed kind. Sometimes, it is true, the mind makes exhilarating leaps, but not often, and if its ethos has at times been associated with the aristocratic-military ethos, which, though deplorably aggressive, is at least spirited, a more common association is with another ethos of later growth and less vivid character, the work ethos of early capitalism, whose defining virtues are patience, the taking of pains, and the denial of spontaneous impulse.

The resentful view of mind cannot be wholly new, else the word *docile*, which originally meant only teachable, would not have long ago come to mean submissive. In our time, however, the social compensations for the sacrifice of personal autonomy which mind is presumed to exact have been drastically devalued, and, as a consequence, resentment of the authority of mind has grown to the point of becoming a virtually political emotion.

Another ground, a more comprehensive one, on which mind is now impeached is its commitment to the ideal of objectivity. What has been called the myth of objective consciousness* is held to be pre-eminently responsible for the dehumanizing tendency of our culture. It is said that objectivity has come to control and pervert our mental life through the agency of technology, which has established as a model of mental

* The phrase is used by Theodore Roszak in *The Making of a Counter-Culture*, 1969, which is perhaps the best-known and also the best-tempered defense of the ideologized antagonism to mind.

process in general the quite special psychology implicit in the method of science. The consequences imputed to the domination of the psychology of science over our way of perceiving the world are readily identified, for, except that they are more extreme, they are those which the Romanticists saw as following from the ascendancy of scientific thought. One of these consequences is said to be the devaluation of the objects of our perception—even if these objects are human beings or human situations, the objective consciousness is accused of not permitting them to exist in their full integral being but only so far as they can be known in abstract and quantifiable terms. Another consequence is that because the psychology of science postulates that all the human faculties shall be subordinate to the one faculty of abstract cognition, we who as perceivers are under the sway of that psychology suffer a deformation of our personal existence, an acute diminution of our humanity. Our instinctual life is curtailed; joy becomes ever less available to us; our natural impulse of sympathy with our fellow men and with the universe we inhabit is thwarted.

No one, I think, can fail to take seriously this description of the mental life of our society. The anxiety it expresses has been with mankind for more than two centuries, at some times less overt than at other times but always there. In 1856, when the technological dispensation was as yet nothing like so encompassing as it has since become, Emerson saw it as having a malevolent power over mental life—"A terrible machine," he

said, "has possessed itself of the ground, the air, and the men and women, and hardly even thought is free." The consciousness that some alien power has taken possession of human existence is now of the very substance of our life in culture. In one or another degree we all share it, we all are aware of some diminution which technology works upon our humanity.

But when we have given this much assent to the common characterization of the mental life of our time, we must see that what distresses us has nothing whatever to do with the intellectual ideal of objectivity as that has traditionally been understood and striven for. Objectivity is by no means an invention of science. It is by no means a limitation upon the range of perception. It does not imply the devaluation of the object that is perceived, its characteristic purpose is not reductive.

Actually the opposite is so. The aim of what we properly call objectivity is the fullest possible recognition of the integral and entire existence of the object. It has always seemed to me that the simplest and best definition of objectivity is contained in that phrase of Matthew Arnold's which I quoted earlier—objectivity is the effort "to see the object as in itself it really is." The object, whether it be a phenomenon of nature, or a work of art, or an idea or system of ideas, or a social problem, or, indeed, a person, is not to be seen as it, or he or she, appears to our habitual thought, to our predilections and prejudices, to our casual or hasty inspection, but as it really is *in itself*, in its own terms, in these

alone. Objectivity, we might say, is the respect we give to the object as object, as it exists apart from us. Eventually we will probably, and properly, see the object in more terms than its own—what in itself it is seen really to be will make it an object of admiration, or an object of affection or compassion, or an object of detestation. This way of seeing the object, as something we move toward or away from, even as something we wish to destroy, is not precluded by the ideal of objectivity, which requires only that, before the personal response is given, the effort to see the object as in itself it really is be well and truly made.

It is an effort which can never wholly succeed. That it must at least partially fail, that the object as in itself it really is can never finally be known, is guaranteed by the nature of individual persons, by the nature of society, even, the philosophers tell us, by the nature of mind itself. In the face of the certainty that the effort of objectivity will fall short of what it aims at, those who undertake to make the effort do so out of something like a sense of intellectual honor and out of the faith that in the practical life, which includes the moral life, some good must follow from even the relative success of the endeavor.

We know that these reasons for making the effort of objectivity have never been universally compelling. And we can scarcely fail to be aware that at the present time their moderateness confirms the belief that mind is discredited because it cannot be in an immediate relation to experience, but must always stand merely

proximate to it, that through mind we can never know the world in a way which is, to use a favorite modern word, authentic—that is to say, real, true, wholly to be relied on. These are, of course, the qualities of experience which mind itself cherishes. But as authenticity is conceived by those who take an adversary position toward mind, it stipulates that only those things are real, true, and to be relied on which are experienced without the intervention of rational thought. And it is on the basis of this judgment that the contemporary ideology of irrationalism proceeds, celebrating the attainment of an immediacy of experience and perception which is beyond the power of rational mind. The means to this end are not new; they are known from of old. They include intuition, inspiration, revelation; the annihilation of selfhood perhaps through contemplation but also through ecstasy and the various forms of intoxication; violence; madness.

The impulse to transcend rational mind would seem to be very deeply rooted in man's nature. Before modern anthropology taught us not to despise or condescend to it, the highest literary and philosophical tradition of Western civilization took sympathetic cognizance of it, together with the various means by which it is thought to be realized. Madness, for example, figures memorably in the work of Plato, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Nietzsche, and Yeats, all of whom represent it as a condition productive of truths which are not accessible to our habitual and socially countenanced mode of perception and constitute an adverse judgment upon

it. No one is ever in doubt that their representation of madness is of the profoundest and most cogent import, yet no one ever supposes them to be urging it upon us that madness, because of the heuristic and moral powers they ascribe to it, is a state of existence which is to be desired and sought for and, as it were, socially established. To say that madness is for them merely a figure of speech would not, I think, state the case accurately. But while their representation of the powers of madness is doubtless something more than a metaphorical construct, it does not ask for credence as a practicable actuality. In our day it has become possible to claim just such credence for the idea that madness is a beneficent condition, to be understood as the paradigm of authentic existence and cognition. This view is advanced not only by speculative laymen but also by a notable section of post-Freudian psychiatric opinion with wide influence in the intellectual community. The position is argued on grounds which are quite overtly political. The line is taken that insanity is directly related to the malign structures and forces of society, not as a mere passive effect but, rather, as an active and significant response to society's destructive will. Insanity is represented as a true perception appropriately acted out—society itself is insane, and when this is understood, the apparent aberration of the individual appears as rationality, as liberation from the delusions of the social madness. From individual madness, its heartbreaking pain, isolation, and distraction blithely ignored, is to be derived the principle by which

society may recover its lost reason and humanity. The project may be taken as the measure of how desperate is the impulse to impugn and transcend the limitations of rational mind.

* * *

In what I have said this evening I have tried to canvass the situation in which mind stands in our nation at the present time. My emphasis has been on the vicissitudes of the situation, on those circumstances of several kinds which might be thought to limit a free, general participation in the activities of mind or to baffle its intentions and fatigue its energies.

As we look back over history, it is difficult to say what part mind has played in the life of nations. A nation's life gets carried on by many agencies, of which conscious and self-conscious mind has seldom over the long past seemed the most salient. Mere habit and inertia are powerful elements of a national life, as are old pieties, as are commitments to particular social interests or classes. And intelligence has always been of moment, what we call practical intelligence, which, in the degree to which it is effectual, is probably more than simply practical. But at a point in relatively recent history, about four centuries ago, there would seem to have developed some obscure unarticulated idea that mind, in the sense in which I have been speaking of it, ought to have a place in the national enterprise. I refer to a phenomenon of English life in the sixteenth

century which Professor J. H. Hexter describes in an interesting essay:* the sudden movement of the aristocracy and gentry into the schools and the two universities. These had hitherto been the preserve of boys and young men of the lower classes who were preparing for careers in the Church. But now, to an extent which in some quarters was thought to be scandalous, their places were pre-empted by young gentlemen. The new tendency was the more surprising because it went against the settled tradition of aristocratic education, which had concerned itself wholly with manners and graces and had quite explicitly excluded all intellectual training as unsuitable to a man of gentle birth. Professor Hexter discovers no documented reason for the sudden change; he speculates, however, that it was brought about by the growing intention of the upper classes to take a more immediate and active part in the government of the nation. What their sons would learn at Winchester and Eton, at Oxford and Cambridge, the disciplines of theology and classical philology in which they would be schooled, could of course have not the slightest bearing upon what they might actually do in governing the nation, but this seems to have caused no dissatisfaction; no one said that the curriculum was not relevant. Apparently the upper classes had somehow got hold of the idea that mind, not in one or another of its specific formal disciplines but in what any one discipline might imply

*"The Education of the Aristocracy in the Renaissance," in *Reappraisals in History*, 1961.

of the essence of mind, was of consequence in statecraft and in the carrying on of the national life. What they would seem suddenly to have identified and wanted to capture for themselves was what nowadays we might call the *mystique* of mind—its energy, its intentionality, its impulse toward inclusiveness and completeness, its search for coherence with due regard for the integrity of the elements which it brings into relation with each other, its power of looking before and after. In some inchoate way these ambitious upper-class parents of the sixteenth century sought the characteristic traits of mind which they might incorporate into the activities of government; and in so doing, in pursuing their inarticulate intuition that mind made the model of the practical activity of society, they proposed the ideal nature of the modern nation-state.

With the passage of time that dim perception has achieved a fuller consciousness—we now judge societies and their governments by the same criteria we use in estimating the rightness of the conduct of mind. We judge them by their energy, their intentionality, their impulse toward inclusiveness, by their striving toward coherence with due regard for the integrity of the disparate elements they comprise, by their power of looking before and after. Plato, when he undertook to say what the right conduct of mind should be, found the paradigm in the just society. We reverse that procedure, finding the paradigm of a just society in the right conduct of mind.

In describing some of the special vicissitudes which

at the present time attend the right conduct of mind, it has not been my intention to suggest that these, though disquieting, are overwhelming. I have not meant to say that mind, in Wells's phrase, is at the end of its tether. In my account of its present situation I have represented mind through its ideal purposes and through the procedures and attitudes by which it moves toward the realization of these ends, through its criteria of order, inclusiveness, and coherence. To speak of mind only in this way is not to describe the life of mind in its full actuality as a human phenomenon. Seen in its totality, seen historically, the life of mind consists as much in its failed efforts as in its successes, in its false starts, its mere approximations, its very errors. It is carried on, we may say, even in the vicissitudes it makes for itself, including its mistrust or denial of its own ideal nature. All these are manifestations of the energies of mind, and William James, a philosopher in whose peculiar largeness of spirit we may perceive an affinity with Jefferson's, was at pains to remind us that they, in all their ill-conditioned disorder, are actually a function of mind's ideal achievement. Mind does not move toward its ideal purposes over a royal straight road but finds its way through the thicket of its own confusions and contradictions.

This thought must always be with us as we make our judgment of the intellectual temper of a culture. Yet we know that when we cast up the fortunes of mind at any given moment in history, what makes the object of our concern is mind as it defines itself by its

ideal purposes, by its power to achieve order, inclusiveness, and coherence. It is when we take mind in this sense that I believe there is reason for disquietude about its future, discerning as I do within the intellectual life of the nation, and not of our nation alone, a notable retraction of spirit, a falling off in mind's vital confidence in itself. The history of mind has of course never been a bland continuity. There have always been periods when mind shines forth with a special luminosity and periods when it withdraws into the shadows. In the past, when a retraction of mind took place, it might well seem to affect only such specific and discrete intellectual life as a society had developed: what was thought of as an ornament of the general life was no longer there and yet the general life went its habitual way. In our time this cannot be the case. When mind, far from being ornamental, part of the superstructure of society, is the very model of the nation-state, as now it is for us, any falling off of its confidence in itself must be felt as a diminution of national possibility, as a lessening of the social hope. It is out of this belief that I have ventured to urge upon you the awareness that mind at the present time draws back from its own freedom and power, from its own delight in itself. That my having done so is not a counsel of despair is assured by one characteristic of mind, its wish to be conscious of itself, with what this implies of its ability to examine a course it has taken and to correct it.

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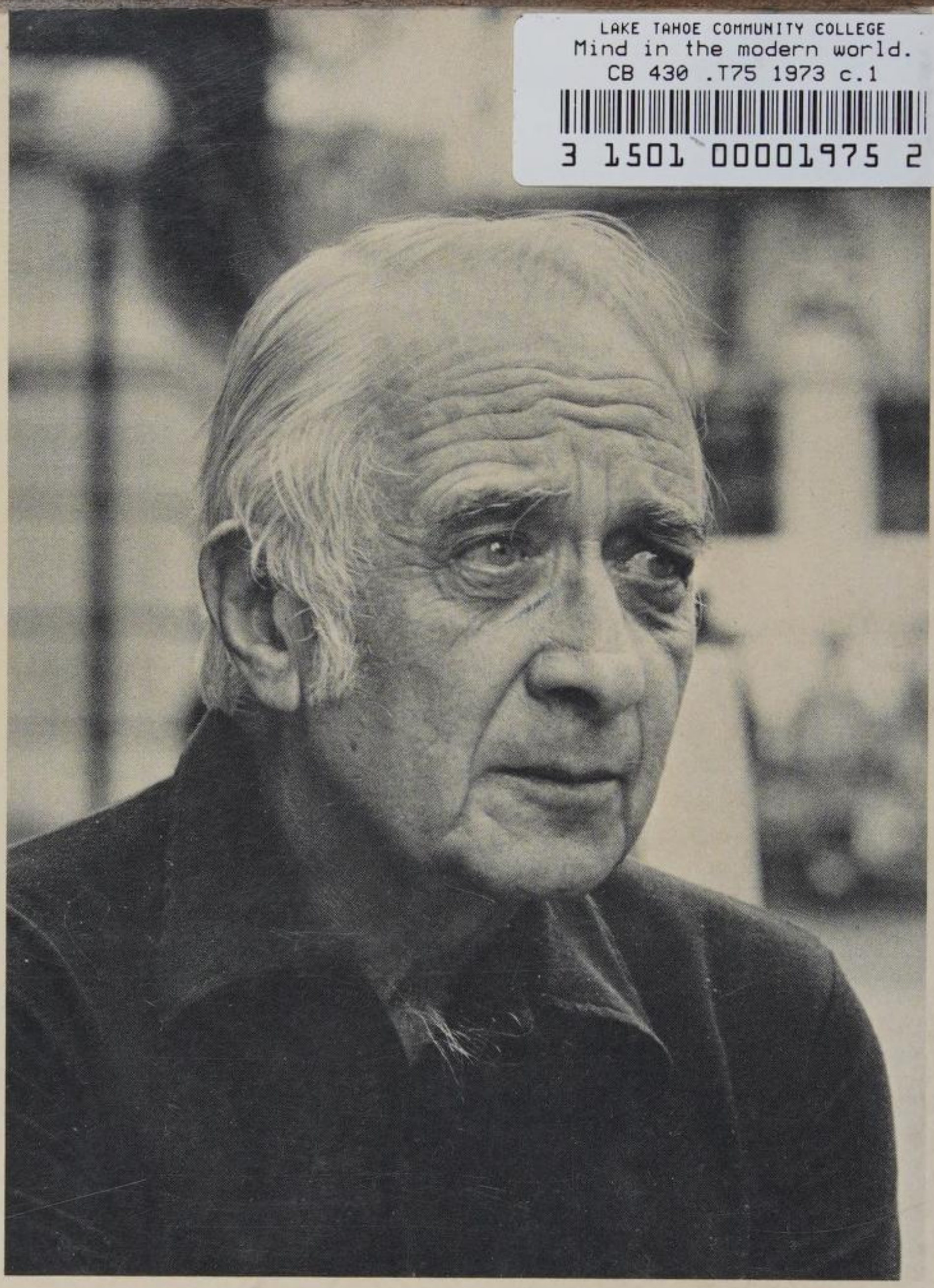

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